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Community Based Inquiry - An exercise to develop student-led philosophical inquiry

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Community Based Inquiry

- An exercise to develop student-led philosophical inquiry

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Introduction: What is Community-Based Inquiry?

This exercise provides opportunity for open philosophical discussion in the classroom, and promotes collaborative inquiry among students. It gives students direct experience of using the basic intellectual tools of philosophical inquiry. These include: clarifying what is at issue, seeking definitions, questioning definitions, spotting assumptions, evaluating inferential reasoning or moral judgments, presenting and examining evidence or explicit arguments.

It is best used after the content of a lesson or module has been covered, as a means to encourage students to explore content in greater depth.

Overview of the exercise

Students write questions in response to a set reading (or video), collectively decide which of their questions are worthy of in-depth discussion, and then direct their own inquiry into those questions.

Equipment:

- 1 volleyball or any similar ball-like object that can be safely thrown within a group circle.
- Chalk or whiteboard markers.
- Board with enough space to allow all students to write a question.
- Movable chairs.

Preparation and Setup

- Assign students one piece of reading. It could be anything from a journal article to a story on a webpage. Videos and podcasts can also be used.
- After completing the reading, students prepare two written questions about the material, which they would like to discuss in class.
- The subject matter of the questions should be left as open as possible, to allow students to direct their own learning and inquiry.
- The questions will be submitted at the end of the class, usually on a credit/no-credit basis; this is to encourage students to properly prepare.

Method:

Phase 1 – Question writing and voting

1. In class, invite students to choose one of their two prepared questions – the one they would most like to discuss – and write it on the board.
2. When everyone has written their question, vote to determine the most popular questions. Each student has two votes to assign.
3. The question with the most votes will be the question for discussion. If time permits, the second and third most popular question can also be discussed.
4. Students and instructor arrange their chairs and sit in a circle.
5. The instructor explains the rules to students:
 - a. Only the person holding the ball can speak.
 - b. The person holding the ball decides who to pass or throw the ball to.
 - c. If the ball is passed to someone, they cannot refuse the ball. However, they do not have to speak, and can instead pass it on.
 - d. Those who wish to speak can raise their hand and wait for the ball.

Phase II - Discussion

6. The person whose question was chosen starts with the ball, and explains their thinking behind the question.
7. The group then attempts to make progress in answering the question.
8. Discussion proceeds via possession of the ball, which is thrown around the circle as required.
 - a. Ideally, students employ the tools of critical thinking: asking for clarification, identifying and questioning assumptions, making inferences, giving examples or evidence, etc.
9. As needed, the instructor requests the ball and then helpfully summarize the discussion or bring together various student insights or questions.

Phase III - Changing the question:

1. If a student feels the discussion has lost momentum or no progress is being made, they can propose to move on to the next discussion question, as per the voting.
2. Someone seconds the proposal to move on.
3. A vote is then taken – simple majority decides.

Phase IV – Concluding the discussion

1. The instructors requests the ball.
2. The instructor asks three questions about the conduct of the group members. This is to encourage reflection on how the activity works. Using thumbs up, down or level, they are asked to rate:
 - a. Whether progress was made on the question
 - b. How they rated their own listening
 - c. How they rated their own involvement and contribution.

Tips for Discussion

1. During voting on questions, it is also possible to select the final question by having students vote and create a top 3, with the instructor then choosing the final question.
2. At the beginning of the discussion, it is helpful to pass the ball around the circle, person by person, and invite students to answer some introductory or icebreaker questions (such as: how was your weekend? What's the most interesting thing that happened to you this week? Etc). This gives students the impetus to speak up when the discussion proper begins.
3. For the first few tries, students will be unfamiliar with the format and progress might be slow. But as students adjust to the process, and take more responsibility for the inquiry, they learn to apply the critical thinking skills of philosophy to the problem.
4. When first using the community discussion style, it is helpful if the instructor regularly requests the ball and helps to keep the discussion focused. HOWEVER: such interventions should be used carefully because the aim is for students to speak directly to each other, not with the instructor.



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